

Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

9
6 Rad
24, 1935

LIBRARY
RECEIVED
★ JAN 22 1944 ★
THE MENACE OF FOREST FIRES
U.S. Department of Agriculture

THE MENACE OF FOREST FIRES
Radio Address Over W.I.S.N., Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 4, 1935

By Scott Leavitt, In Charge, Public Relations
Regional Office, U. S. Forest Service

In all of the Forest Service broadcasts of this series, I have placed repeated emphasis on the fact that any program of restoration of Forests and every plan we can possibly make to benefit the people thereby will fail utterly unless forest fires are kept from destroying what Forests we, in cooperation with the states and with nature, are rebuilding.

It seems fitting, now that the season of increasing travel and use of the Forests for recreation is here, that we should talk about forest fires more definitely and in more detail. It is at once a sordid and thrilling story of a never ending war. Those of us who are old timers in the Forest Service know of years when battles have been fought which took their grim and pathetic toll of human lives. Always Forest fires bring death to wild creatures which inhabit the woods. Always they bring destruction to trees. Always they pollute the rivers with leached ashes. Always they add to the destructive power of the floods by laying bare the earth. Always they increase the eroding away of the soil. Always they replace the beauty of the living verdure with waste lands which are black, grey, and ghastly with death. Often human beings, such as you and I, die miserably in them.

A good many years ago, when I was a Forest Ranger in the far western mountains, I rode my horse to the top of a hill where several days before lightning had struck a tree and started a forest fire. Another Ranger had seen the smoke and, by hard riding, had reached it in time to control it after several hours of exhausting labor. It was evident that even in the midst of that grueling battle, the Ranger's sense of humor had not deserted him, for, after conquering the blaze, he had gone to the very tree which the lightning had struck and had mailed on it a warning of the drastic penalty of fine and imprisonment which would be visited by the law upon whomever dared to set fires in the woods.

That warning did not, of course, stop the lightning from setting still other fires. It only relieved the feelings of that light hearted capable Ranger, and gave him a grim chance to grin and shake his head at the Creator. But the incident does serve to bring to us the thought that, inevitable as such lightning strokes are in the woods, the great bulk of the fires which destroy our Forests are not started by lightning, but by the intention, neglect, or carelessness of human beings like you and me. That being the regrettable case, those warnings of penalties of the law are necessary and fair, because we of the Forest Service do not wish anyone to get into trouble through misunderstanding or ignorance.

That there must be such laws, you will agree, when I tell you that out of every 100 fires started in the woods of this country as a whole, taking it year in and year out, less than ten are started by lightning. That means that more than ninety per cent are started by people. It also means that nine out of every ten and in some sections as many as ninety nine out of every one hundred fires are quite unnecessary, and could be prevented. The law by itself is quite powerless to prevent them all, but education and an aroused public opinion can, in cooperation with the law, bring the desired results.

The vast majority of people who set fires in the woods have no intention of doing harm. They simply do not understand. But whatever may be said in behalf of good intentions, the cold fact remains that he who starts fires in the woods, whether purposely or not, is very likely to become in effect a murderer. I say that advisedly, as you soon will see.

Here in these Central States we have been inclined to minimize the danger and seriousness of our own forest fires and to dramatize the great, roaring conflagrations of the Western Mountains - in the Rockies, the Sierras, the Cascades, and the Coast Range. There is indeed drama there, and tragedy, too. The United States Forest Service turns with pride to tales of the heroism and sacrifice of its men. They are stirring stories of battles against raging flames which became roaring infernos, far back in the wilderness areas among those mighty peaks. There is indeed a breathless interest in such grim struggles as those of 1910. Then, for example, flames ravaged two million acres in northern Idaho and western Montana, like the scourge of the ancient Attila, and slew at their posts eighty-five fire fighters who faced the red line and went down like soldiers in battle.

Those forest fires have been immortalized in poem and romance, with Rangers guiding their entrapped crews into old mining tunnels and standing guard at the entrances with blistered faces and scared hands. It is a tale well worth the telling, but here in these Central States we must not forget that in all our history the most costly forest fires in their destruction of human life have occurred, not in the Far West, but right here in these States of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota, right here around the Great Lakes and the headwaters of the Mississippi.

No forest fire of which I have found any record ever took such a terrible toll of human lives as did one which raged here in Wisconsin in 1871. I referred to it in another broadcast, very briefly. It covered 1,280,000 acres in the region around Green Bay, and it is called the Peshtigo Fire. It left in its sad wake, besides the terrible toll of wild creatures, trees, and barren land laid waste, the charred and pathetic bodies of 1,500 women and men and little children.

What or who caused that holocaust is not today definitely known. Whether it was logging operations, settlers clearing their land, smokers in the woods, incendiaries, lightning - no one can say. History does not

record it. It is believed that small fires starting from various causes of carelessness and human neglect and fostered by drought, were swept together by rushing winds, caused by the fires themselves. That is the history of many such overwhelming disasters. But the fires of later years can be more definitely charged against the guilty. Hundreds, yes, thousands of man caused fires ravage the forests of these Central States every year. They are already starting this year's destruction.

It is truthfully asserted that more of the virgin timber which once clothed these states with a garment of beauty and material wealth has been sacrificed to the flames than ever was cut, manufactured, or destroyed by lumbering operations, and the processes of settling the country.

We fall naturally into the use of war terms in discussing the constant menace of forest fires. Let us speak then of that fateful dread war year of 1918. On the twelfth of that October, just a month before the Armistice was signed in France and while the attention of our people was riveted on the drive of our victorious battalions and in searching the list of the wounded and killed in that struggle, the red enemy, fire, swept through the timbered country around Cloquet and Moose Lake at the very threshold of Duluth. It advanced on a wide, roaring front with the winds shouting above it in hurricane fierceness; and in its relentless attack it overwhelmed hundreds of homes, reduced to ashes and blackened stumps the rich, green glory of the woodland, slew countless panic-stricken deer and hovering partridges, filled the ash-poisoned streams with floating dead fish - and it suffocated and burned to death 432 poor human wretches who fell as helpless before it as their brothers on the French fields of battle fell before gas, shrapnel, and lead. I doubt if as many Americans were killed in France on that grim twelfth of October as were sacrificed here at home in that one forest fire.

I am intentionally dramatizing this story in terms of battle and death to thrust home the truth that our struggle against forest fires is indeed a continuous war against an enemy destructive of life, homes and untold millions of wealth. We must face it as such.

The United States Forest Service is but one agency in this war against forest fires. Its holdings are small in these Central States as compared to the vast forest areas owned by private concerns and individuals. The states own other tracts and it is State laws and State responsibility which control and guard the great bulk of these lands. But within its own limited area and in close cooperation with the states, the U. S. Forest Service holds an important sector on the battlefield for Forest protection. Within the National Forests, it has erected steel framed towers from which Guards watch for the first plumes of smoke. Rangers have organized their forces so that quick attack is possible to keep the fires within bounds and prevent them from spreading. In the plan of detection and control, in some places, the airplane and even the radio play their part.

The boys of the Civilian Conservation Camps are the reserves ready to go at a moment's notice under the leadership of trained Forest Rangers.

Shovels, axes, mattocks, portable pumps to suck water out of the streams and throw it upon the flames; food supplies; camp and bedding equipment; quick transportation by air, land, and water - all these are always assembled and instantly ready. Quick discovery and immediate efficient attack are the sole elements of success against forest fires.

For thirty odd years, the United States Forest Service has carried on this war against forest fires. It has traditions like those of a gallant regiment down through the years. It is ready, efficient, and willing, but there is still a vital need of public understanding and cooperation.

"Many people who desire to assist in preventing fire damage are in doubt just what to do," has said one of our Forest Supervisors. "These suggestions are offered because the Forest Service recognizes that the whole-hearted cooperation of every person in and near the National Forests is essential to successfully reducing fire damage, and in keeping the Forests green and beautiful.

"Smokers and campers are the cause of most of the man-caused Forest fires which now occur. Smokers indifferently or carelessly discard burning matches, cigars, cigarettes, and tobacco from moving vehicles.

"In many cases these die out without doing harm. The great expense and damage are involved frequently because these fire starters are not entirely extinguished before they are dropped. Always be sure that no fire or glow remains. Better still, equip vehicles with containers for ashes, stubs, and used matches.

"Smokers who are afoot or on horse back must use the utmost care if damaging fires are to be eliminated. Voluntary restraint from smoking is urged during dry seasons or on areas where the fire hazard is high. Places where timber has been cut or where the grass is ripe and dry are examples of high fire hazard areas. Most outdoor travelers have a sense of good woodmanship and select a safe place to build a fire. A few, however, are unused to being in the open and lack knowledge of the danger of fire in the absence of certain precautions.

"Every individual or party who builds open fires, whether traveling by auto or otherwise, should be equipped with shovel, axe, or water bucket. Kerosene or gasoline camp stoves are safer than open fires.

"Never build a fire against a log or stump, because when it gets burning, it is difficult to put out, and in all probability there will be fire left under the log or in the roots after you

think you have killed it. Hours or days later an increased wind fans these embers into flames, and a forest fire results.

"Never build a fire near brush or dried grass. The wind may cause you to lose control of it in a few seconds.

"Never build a fire against a tree, even if the fire does not scorch the foliage, it will dry out the bark and injure the root growth, and repetition of the fire kills the tree.

"Select the right kind of a place, scrape away all inflammable material from the spot five feet in diameter. Dig a hole in the center in which to build a fire. Keep it small.

"Do not leave it unattended, even for a few minutes. A sudden wind may cause it to do the unexpected thing.

"Do not leave camp until you are perfectly sure that your camp fire is out.

"Be sure your own fires are out. Do not smoke where there is any danger of fire. During dry weather, do not smoke in woods or grass. Be sure all fire is out, cigarettes, pipes, cigars, or matches before discarding.

"Drowning a campfire is the surest way to kill it. Pour water on the fire, and with a shovel or stick stir the embers, dirt and water together until it is well puddled, and then pour on more water.

"Take immediate action on any unattended fire you find. Fires attacked immediately can be controlled in a few minutes. If it is small, put it out, then notify Ranger's office; if large, notify Ranger or CCC camp at once."

So I close this sixth broadcast of this series by the United States Forest Service. Roosevelt once said, "A true Forest is not merely a store house full of wood, but as it were, a factory of wood, and at the same time a reservoir of water. When you help to preserve our Forests or to plant new ones, you are acting the part of good citizens. The value of forestry deserves, therefore, to be taught in the schools which aim to make good citizens of you."

The radio gives us a broader school of good citizenship than was ever before possible, and there is no more valuable lesson for us to send over it than that of our personal opportunity and individual responsibility in the saving of our Forests from fire. Use the Forests to the full, but also preserve them so that others forever may have them likewise for profit and enjoyment.

